



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Reviewing Stand

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The Meaning of Easter In a Modern World

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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The Meaning of Easter

In a Modern World

MR. BUCHANAN: Just what does Easter mean in a modern world?

MR. MCLEOD: Tragically the meaning of Easter for all too many people in our modern world of crass commercialization is that of "put on your Easter bonnet with all the frills upon it" and join with the millions in the gigantic Easter parade. It is a pageantry of clothes horses making their annual pilgrimage to our churches.

MR. OLDS: It seems to me the meaning of Easter is not given as a fact open to the eye like a fuchsia hat or a Broadway parade; it is given in the drama of the inner man where we meet God intimately and decisively.

MR. SITTLER: But if the Easter fact is rooted in God, then its meaning does not change. What God has spoken He still speaks. Easter has the same meaning for the man on Michigan Boulevard here in Chicago today as it had for Mary in the garden.

* * *

MR. BUCHANAN: Easter, it seems to me, is a great many things to a great many people—just as we have suggested—ranging from an occasion to promenade in the latest fashions, as you say, Chaplain McLeod, to a moment for reflection on the spiritual rebirth of the world.

'Deeper Meaning in Life'

Now, Mr. McLeod, you speak of the crass commercialism of Easter. Do you think it overshadows the spiritual meaning for most of us?

MR. MCLEOD: No, I am sure it doesn't. I purposely referred to the superficial evidences. I am sure in the human heart there is still the strange wistfulness and longing to find a deeper meaning in life. And I think it is crystallized at the Easter season.

MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Olds, on the other hand, you believe that the meaning of Easter differs with each individual. What, then, makes that difference in our lives and our feeling about Easter?

MR. OLDS: That God can resurrect within a man newness of life I think is a fact, but what that fact means turns on his response and appropriation of it.

MR. BUCHANAN: You seem to think that time or place makes no difference at all in the meaning of Easter, Mr. Sittler. By that do you mean the individual has no place in this picture?

MR. SITTLER: No, I mean, as Mr. Olds has already suggested, that there is a difference between a fact and man's interpretation of that fact. A man may be hit by a bus on Michigan Boulevard and twenty people may interpret the fact differently, but the fact preceded the hitting of the man by the bus because he is smashed up and in the hospital. That fact has a reality apart from the fact that people talk about it.

Resurrection Comes First

MR. BUCHANAN: And by that fact do you mean the actual resurrection of Christ?

MR. SITTLER: I mean there was no Easter until there was a resurrection. Easter is the fact of the resurrection plus the interpretations men have added to it.

MR. MCLEOD: It seems to me that such a fact has meaning today. I wonder if you men have thought what would happen if a certain headline appeared in the paper tomorrow. It wouldn't necessarily be about the atomic bomb, or about Russia, or the possibility of war. But I say that this particular

headline would interrupt every radio program and command by its very news value the eyes and ears of the world. Want to guess what it would be?

MR. BUCHANAN: Would it concern an individual? The death of an important man?

MR. McLEOD: Not a contemporary individual. No, here it is: "The Body of Christ Found!" And here is how it would sound on the air: "Archeologists have established by incontrovertible evidence that the body recently unearthed is that of Jesus of Nazareth, carefully embalmed. The marks of the crucifixion are on His hands and feet. The body was found in an ancient tomb inscribed as belonging to Joseph of Armathea. The remains are there. That is all."

MR. BUCHANAN: I think we should point out after the experience of Orson Welles and his Mars invasion that this is not a fact. We do not want to be flooded with calls and letters.

But I think it is an interesting proposition. What would occur there, do you think, Mr. Olds?

Concept Is Individual

MR. OLDS: It might help sharpen what I was trying to suggest earlier, that for me the meaning of Easter is not a fact open to the eye. Hence the discovery of the body of Christ, so far as I am concerned, would not detract from the meaning of Easter; as a matter of fact, it might remove an impediment.

MR. BUCHANAN: Why do you think differently, then, Mr. McLeod?

MR. McLEOD: I think it would mean for a great many people that the world defeated Jesus Christ, that Calvary is true, but that Easter is a lie.

MR. BUCHANAN: I think I see the point there; but I am not sure I follow distinctly why that should upset our views today.

MR. McLEOD: Well, I think it would cast some doubt on all the things that

Jesus said, some of His authority would be stripped from Him. It would point out that He was a victim of a lot of jealous rulers and a mob, that the whole thing we believe today was nothing but a colossal hoax.

MR. OLDS: That turns, don't you think, Chaplain McLeod, on whether one thinks the fact of Easter turns on the disappearance of the body—for instance, that it wasn't in the tomb. I don't happen to think that the absence of the body from the tomb is the sole fact explaining the belief of the early church in the resurrection. I don't know what Mr. Sittler as a theologian would say about that.

MR. BUCHANAN: What would be that belief from the Biblical point of view, Mr. Sittler?

'Ground for Belief'

MR. SITTLER: I think it could be established from the history of the earliest Christian believers that the physical reappearance of Jesus was the *ground* for belief—but that faith did not hang exclusively upon that. For instance, a certain officer in the Roman army wrote to his chief of staff at Caesarea, "I have got a crazy fellow down here who is stirring up a fuss about Jesus. Everybody down here knows He is dead . . . but Paul says He is alive." That is the real meaning of Easter.

MR. BUCHANAN: There is no definite word in the Bible on that?

MR. SITTLER: Not one by which we may limit the resurrection belief by anything *we* call a body.

MR. BUCHANAN: How do we come to this view that discovery of the body would so vary our religious beliefs?

MR. McLEOD: Because there are a great many people who think in terms of a body which rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. It would destroy much of the theological thinking of many people today.

MR. BUCHANAN: What are other thoughts along that line? I am inter-

ested in your idea, Mr. Olds, that it wouldn't make much difference. In other words, if you have the belief, the belief is there. Am I interpreting your statement correctly?

MR. OLDS: I mean something slightly different from that. I mean to suggest that the fact of God's activity in history at that point which was called resurrection is what I would call a spiritual fact. That is to say, it is not something open to the eye like a tree or a lake or something of that sort. It is appropriated in a different dimension, in a different way; and to identify a man with his body is something that I certainly would not want to do. And I am inclined to think they didn't do so.

Belief In Immortality

MR. BUCHANAN: You mean the belief in the life everlasting regardless of the physical being of the body is the important thing?

MR. OLDS: Yes. This affirms that the meaning of man's life always goes beyond his physical existence. This is emphasized in the early belief in immortality in the ancient and Greek world, where the person was conceived as something over and above the body. To be sure he used the body, but he wasn't to be identified with the body in any physical sense.

MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Sittler, how would that affect your point of view that before the actual resurrection there was no such fact. That is, before the bus struck the man nothing happened? The Greeks apparently had such thoughts long before the birth of Christ.

MR. SITTLER: The Greeks had ideas about immortality. But these beliefs don't add up to the meaning of Easter. In the crucifixion of Jesus, a very particular man was put to death; Christian belief is that this particular man is restored to life by God.

MR. BUCHANAN: Is that one event the most important thing toward the total belief?

MR. SITTLER: I think there is no doubt that, had there been no event of this kind, there would be no discussion of the kind we are carrying on here.

MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. McLeod, what is the connection between the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and, perhaps my own belief that there is a life everlasting? Can I identify what He has done with myself?

'Act of God'

MR. McLEOD: To some degree, yes. But, of course, it is a spiritual fact which man at best can only approximate in his understanding and appreciation. This was an act of God. This was the Son of God of whom we speak.

MR. BUCHANAN: We have talked in general terms about the meaning of Easter, especially in those early times. Can we put it down to a specific basis? What does Easter mean in this world now torn with strife, possible war, and possible depression? I am looking for an answer. Can I find it in Easter, Mr. Olds?

MR. OLDS: I think I would make two or three practical suggestions. In contrast to the present preoccupation with external factors to save the world such as the Marshall Plan, Atlantic Pact, etc., Easter comes with a message that the salvation of man begins from within. That is one of its meanings for us at least.

MR. BUCHANAN: If I understand, what I do, then, determines whether I will be saved or not?

MR. OLDS: It is all decisive, yes.

MR. BUCHANAN: What about the general belief that God takes care of all His creatures and, no matter what I do, I will be protected?

MR. SITTLER: God takes care of all His creatures, indeed; but He takes care of them as the kind of people He has made. He has not made us puppy dogs or kittens or cabbages in a garden. He has made us people who can hear Him speak, who have the possibility to respond.

MR. BUCHANAN: In other words, we must fulfill our place in this particular society in which He has placed us?

MR. SITTLER: That's true. God has an intention, and we must live in a way proper to that intention.

MR. BUCHANAN: I think I interrupted Mr. Olds. You had some other thoughts on the meaning of Easter in a modern world.

'Lent to be Spent'

MR. OLDS: I was going to suggest that Easter, concerned with death and new life, teaches us that the lesson of dying is that life is lent to be spent. I didn't mean to pun on the notion Lent, but I think there is a double meaning quite significant here.

MR. BUCHANAN: Isn't that rather antithetical? The secret to death is life, and vice versa? I am confused.

MR. OLDS: I think that thought is part of the deeper meaning of Easter, that the miracle of life really is bound up in this mystery of death. How a man learns to die determines what he thinks of life and what he discovers of meaning in it.

MR. BUCHANAN: Why do you say that?

MR. OLDS: I suppose in part from what I understand of what the Christian means by Easter and by resurrection. Certainly my understanding is that God is able to raise a man from this futility and frustration of life which many theologians call death to a renewed spirit of hope, of expectation, and of fulfillment.

MR. MCLEOD: I think we have a tendency to assume that man is capable of getting to God through his own thinking, or by some strange mystical ecstasy or by moral effort or his own insight. And that to me would make Easter more of a problem, would make Jesus a problem still unsolved and He be a question instead of being the answer to it. I think we are still journeying without arriving; we are still seeking without finding the one

truth that makes all truth true and triumphant and real. That is what we are seeking in Easter.

MR. SITTLER: I agree with Mr. McLeod there because in terms of the Biblical speech we don't read that Jesus *emerged* from the grave. We read, rather, that God raised Him up. The passive form of the verb is the precise point! God, who created the universe, did another creation and the second creation is as great as the first.

MR. OLDS: I certainly don't want to suggest that this miracle of life bound up in dying is a simple or easy thing, or that it is like picking plums from an orchard. But, I certainly would protest the view that the activity of God on a man is some external burgling of a man's soul or doing something in spite of his strenuous concern and effort to respond.

MR. MCLEOD: I don't think any argument about Easter is really needed, at this point. I think the fact of Easter is there. You see, a lot of people are willing to take Jesus as a great figure in history, but others might have uttered nearly every word that He said, still it wouldn't and couldn't fail to move the human heart to some degree. I don't think they could have uttered every word He said, as "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

Importance of Resurrection

MR. OLDS: What I wanted to suggest is that this second act of creation as Mr. Sittler points out, is wholly unintelligible to me apart from the first act, namely the life and work of the person, Jesus of Nazareth. Take away that life with its contribution to insight into the character of human life, and to me the second creation would be simply beyond the scope of my imagination.

MR. BUCHANAN: You mean, if Jesus had not been the person He was, doing the teaching and having the fame in the community, this fact of resurrection might have gone almost unnoticed?

MR. OLDS: Precisely. I think it is the character of this life which qualifies the notion of resurrection.

MR. SITTLER: Well, to these two creations on which Mr. Olds insists I would add one upon which I think he would not insist, and that is the fact that I believe that God in Christ enters decisively into human history. The very fact of this belief is a third creation as great as the resurrection of Christ and the creation of the world.

MR. BUCHANAN: I see where we cannot separate the three, or perhaps we can, Mr. Olds?

MR. OLDS: I want to be sure I understand what Mr. Sittler is suggesting. Is he suggesting that this appropriation of this act of God in Christ is itself a miracle, as it were?

MR. SITTLER: It is a miracle, not of my creation. It is God's creation.

MR. OLDS: God's creation—that belief in you?

MR. SITTLER: That I believe in God at all is a miracle as great as any that Jesus performed.

MR. BUCHANAN: How is that?

MR. SITTLER: Because everything in the world says, "No," and it is by the power of God alone that I am moved and enabled to say, "Yes!"

Ostrich Complex?

MR. OLDS: I can't accept that at all—that everything in my experience says *no* to such a belief. If there were no evidence in the world for this belief, not only in God but the way in which He works in history, to accept it as true would seem sheer folly! This sounds to me like an ostrich complex.

MR. SITTLER: God has evidenced His existence in the world. The Letter to the Romans says that He evidenced himself in the things that are made.

MR. McLEOD: Of course, what Mr. Sittler and Mr. Olds are driving at to

some degree is that we all have a responsibility, and to some degree we must not initiate but continue a power which is already present. That is, we discover for ourselves what is God's will for us in our lives in this world. And that to me is all related to Easter.

MR. BUCHANAN: I think that the three views might come together. They also might be a little confusing to the layman. I would like to ask for a little more clarification. You believe, then, Mr. Sittler, that the very fact that anyone believes in God is a miracle in itself because the facts of the case would not point to such belief?

MR. SITTLER: That is a very good statement of exactly what I believe, which, I think, is a transcription of Jesus' statement to Simon Peter, when Peter said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said, "You didn't learn this of yourself, by virtue of your flesh and blood, but the Father in Heaven has revealed this to you."

Why Believe in God?

MR. BUCHANAN: May I ask you directly why you believe in God?

MR. SITTLER: I believe in God because God gives me the grace whereby I believe in Him. Of myself I could not.

MR. OLDS: This seems to me like it is anybody's ball game. If God wants to reach down and reveal something to me, that is a wonderful thing. I should be grateful. But what if God withholds this from me? It seems to me this business of life in 1949 exacts something of me and that my relation to God requires a certain initiative and response on my part. It may be a gift, but it most certainly is a task!

MR. SITTLER: What I mean to say is that the work of God by which I may believe in Him is accessible to every man. It requires that I respond to His call to me with decision. I don't mean I am quiescent. It is accessible to every man, but it isn't acceptable to every man.

MR. MCLEOD: I don't think you two are so very far apart. Neither of you conceive of God as being some sort of glorified Edgar Bergen to whom we are so many Charlie McCarthys. I think we are something more than puppets in this world, that God has done something to us, placed something in us when we were created; and as is so often reiterated, "Now are you sons and daughters of God, and it doth not yet appear what you shall become." We are in process. We are on the road. We haven't arrived.

God Is Everything

MR. SITTLER: God creates the process and the road and the steam in the boiler that pushes us all along the road.

MR. OLDS: I am afraid, if I understand Mr. Sittler, I would disagree. I hope it is not a matter of words, but it is sounds to me as though this responsibility of mine is a kind of a mask behind which God is pulling the controls, even in spite of the earlier statement that such was not the case.

MR. BUCHANAN: I don't see too much divergence. I would like to turn to a statement I heard the other day: "We don't need to worry much about the world. God created the world so therefore God will take care of it." Do you think we can adopt a complacent attitude like that, Mr. McLeod?

MR. MCLEOD: No, not a completely complacent attitude because of the fact that though God is in the world reconciling the world to Himself. I still think He expects us to assume responsibilities. He has engendered that in our makeup and our being.

MR. OLD: I certainly wouldn't agree with Whittier, who said, "If God had not known the universe was fireproof He wouldn't have given us matches." I think He gave us matches, and I don't think the universe is fireproof. And if we want to blow the thing up, I think that marks our unique endowment of which Mr. Sittler spoke earlier.

MR. SITTLER: I think, however, as over against Mr. Olds' statement that one should say the very fact that God has created man and creates him in His image means that He doesn't create him a bolt or a cog, and the response of which Mr. Olds speaks is as implicit in what I said as in what he said. The historical fact is that the men who believe that God finally initiates all things have not been sluggards but among the most active, as history shows: Augustine, Luther, Wesley.

MR. BUCHANAN: How can we bring this to the modern situation? What can I find in Easter from what you have said?

'Yes' Against the 'No's'

MR. SITTLER: I think you can find in Easter the fundamental thing that our life needs as all life has needed it: Over against the facts of history and the melancholy facts of our involvement in apparently hopeless situations, God has once addressed a mighty *yes* to history in the action of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that *yes* as over against all the world's accumulated *no's* is available to every man, if he will.

MR. BUCHANAN: How can I apply this Christianity, so-called, Mr. Olds, to the world situation. As a single person what can I do against the forces of politics and war?

MR. OLD: Following Mr. Sittler's statement, I think that not only does God address the world with a decisive *yes* in Jesus, but He has continued to address the world with a decisive *yes* in every life that has responded to this affirmation. Philip Wiley says at the close of that book, *Generation of Vipers*, that the world must be made better, and it must begin by making better men, and that begins with you. Easter always begins at that point I think.

MR. BUCHANAN: You mean the collective action of many individuals will be the important thing, but it must start with me as a person?

MR. OLDS: Precisely. I don't see any point in rushing around frantically concerned with world problems, while neglecting the man who lives next door to me or my wife. I am not excluding that other concern, but certainly I must begin where I live to translate that message into life and move out from there.

'Begin with Yourself'

MR. SITTLER: I, who have been on the other side of the table from Mr. Olds, now wish to line up on his side at this moment because I believe that the world's problems are, in a sense, the magnification of individual problems. And just as people cannot put upon a religious problem a beautiful hat or hang upon it a nice dress or pack it up and take it off to Florida, so the accumulated problems of mankind can't be solved either by the cosmetic attitude of simply dressing them up and taking an annual pilgrimage to a sanctuary on Easter morning.

MR. BUCHANAN: What about criticism of the platitudes of Easter, the fact that the same sermon is preached each Easter Sunday. Do you think that is an honest criticism, Mr. McLeod?

MR. MCLEOD: It may be tragically true of many of our preachers that they preach the same sermon, that the only time they preach immortality is on Easter. And that is too bad, because I think Easter is not something isolated, not like the little island down off the coast of South America. I think Easter is part of the whole mainland.

MR. BUCHANAN: You mean the island that is called Easter Island?

MR. MCLEOD: Yes.

We have made Easter a day apart, as Mr. Sittler has said, a day of parade and of annual pilgrimages. But Easter is part of the mainland. Easter is not only something to believe; it is something to do. It means giving the things that last on into eternity an

upper place in our lives, of committing ourselves to something greater and bigger than we are. That is the Easter fact.

MR. SITTLER: You see, Mr. McLeod has suggested something very important here. In the Bible eternal life is not some kind of future fire insurance. In the Bible eternal life is the quality of man's life with God which begins now. It was fulfilled in eternity, but the quality of it begins at any moment and is accessible at any moment for any man.

MR. MCLEOD: You mean, Mr. Sittler, that we ought to begin to work for an order of life in the world that has a chance of becoming a part of this abundant life of which Jesus preached?

MR. SITTLER: That's right. Jesus didn't speak eternal life in only futuristic terms, but regularly as present indicative active—*now*.

MR. BUCHANAN: It is available to those who would take advantage of it?

MR. SITTLER: Precisely.

MR. BUCHANAN: Would that fit in with your idea of the individual, Mr. Olds?

All Are Concerned

MR. OLDS: I was about to echo a Methodist *Amen* here in response to what has just been said. This steadfast concern to translate the good news of God into the fabric of every decision and relationship of human life is indeed the busy business of every one of us. It is not restricted to preachers and Easter, but is required of everybody every day of the year.

MR. SITTLER: My point was that we have something to translate before we get on to the translation. I insist on Easter as a fact. But I agree that, having had the text, we now must proceed with the translation.

MR. BUCHANAN: We have talked rather disparagingly about those who attend church only on Easter Sunday.

Isn't that better than not going at all, Mr. McLeod?

MR. MCLEOD: Yes, I suppose it is better than not at all, but I think it would be very helpful if they would only remember that we do business at that same stand every Sunday.

Church and Camouflage

MR. SITTLER: I don't think it is better at all! I think it simply deepens their illusion that it means something, whereas, after all, it means nothing, and the meaninglessness of it ought to be dramatized.

MR. OLDS: I agree with Mr. Sittler that the motivation which brings a

great many people to church on Easter Sunday, whether they are fed or not, throws up a camouflage before what they might otherwise discover.

MR. BUCHANAN: It seems to me, gentlemen, that you suggest that each of us take a moment to think what Easter means to himself. We might well spend a bit of time in thinking of the first Easter, too, the Biblical concept, and of the many succeeding Sundays from that time to the present moment.

You will agree, I feel, that the meaning of Easter is up to the individual. But the sum of these meanings—the total of all individual beliefs—is that of most importance to our world.



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EDDY, SHERWOOD *Portrait of Jesus; A Twentieth Century Interpretation of Christ*. New York, Harper, 1943.

A critical and constructive study of Jesus: interpretations of Paul and Johannine literature.

FERM, VERGILIUS T. A., ed. *Religion in the Twentieth Century*. New York, Philosophical Library, 1948.

Interpretations of religions of the world in the twentieth century.

GRIERSON, HERBERT *And the Third Day*. New York, Macmillan, 1949.

Paintings by some great masters illustrating selections from great literature around the theme of the resurrection.

LUNN, ARNOLD HENRY MOORE *The Third Day*. London, Burns, 1945.

"An argument, with the Imprimatur of the Archbishop of Baltimore and Washington, to prove the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus."

OURSLEER, FULTON *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. New York, Doubleday & Co., 1949.

The story of Jesus; a chronology of events from the betrothal of Mary and Joseph to the days after the resurrection.

PERRY, RALPH BARTON *The Hope for Immortality*. New York, Vanguard Press, 1945.

An essay which discusses the meaning of life and death, and the justification for a belief in immortality.

TAYLOR, ALFRED EDWARD *Christian Hope of Immortality*. New York, Macmillan, 1947.

A reissue of this realistic discussion of the immortality of our souls.

TAYLOR, ALFRED EDWARD *Does God Exist?* New York, Macmillan, 1947.

A standard handbook of apologetics.

Christian Century 64:426-7, Apr. 2, '47; Discussion 64:529, 626, Apr. 23, May 14, '47. "Immortality Brought to Light." R. D. BULKLEY.

Argument for belief in immortality and discussions in reply.

Christian Herald 68:2, Apr., '45. "Man's Greatest Victory, A Message from the President." FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT.

"The story of the resurrection is the expression of man's highest aspiration; it is the story of man's greatest victory—his triumph over death."

Christian Herald 72:24, Apr., '49. "And the Life Everlasting." J. RICHARD SNEED.

A sermon on immortality and the resurrection.

Journal of Religion 28:120-30, 188-203, Apr., June '48. "Resurrection of the Body." R. M. GRANT.

Historical analysis of the doctrine of the resurrection.

London Quarterly Review 172:163-6 Apr. '47. "Factual Basis of Theology." J. BAKER.

Brief discussion of the facts of the Atonement, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection—which provide Christianity with its basic doctrines.

London Quarterly Review 172:130-36, Apr. '47. "Serialism and the Christian View of Immortality." W. GILL.

Beginning with an acceptance of the theory of relativity and serialism, the author theorizes on the meaning of immortality to the Christian.



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